

EPA will review oil, gas pollution standards

By JUDITH KOHLER - Associated Press writer | Posted: Thursday, December 10, 2009 7:15 am |

DENVER -- Federal officials, responding to a complaint by environmentalists, have agreed to review air pollution standards for oil and gas operations to decide if they need to be updated.

The proposed settlement of a complaint by WildEarth Guardians and the Colorado-based San Juan Citizens Alliance calls for the Environmental Protection Agency to start the review in January 2011. The settlement needs court approval.

The nationwide review would be the first since the EPA approved one set of standards in 1985 and another in 1999, said Robin Cooley, an attorney with Earthjustice who represented the two groups.

"They have an obligation to review and revise the standards to make sure they stay up to date," Cooley said.

The regulations have remained unchanged while energy development has increased and science and technology have advanced, said Jeremy Nichols of WildEarth Guardians.

The groups also want the EPA to set standards for pollutants not currently regulated, including greenhouse gases.

Natural gas development in the Rockies, at record rates before the recession, has been blamed for increasing levels of ground-level ozone.

Ozone levels typically rise in the summer, when emissions from vehicles and other sources react with sunlight to form smog. But scientists and regulators say the pollution has been a problem in northwest Wyoming and other spots in the winter because of emissions from gas fields.

Colorado regulators tightened regulations on gas producers in northern Colorado in 2006 when the Denver area exceeded federal ozone standards. They believe emissions from engines and vapors escaping from tanks are contributing to the pollution.

Industry representatives have disputed that oil and operations are the main culprit.

"We're certainly not the entire problem," said Kathleen Sgamma, director of governmental affairs for the Denver-based Independent Petroleum Association of Mountain States, a trade group.

She said the industry has worked hard to reduce pollution. Her group is part of an initiative by Western Governors' Association program that is developing an inventory of oil and gas emissions in the region.

Sgamma said contrary to the environmental groups' assertions, the EPA has aggressively regulated the oil and gas industry. She also said new standards for pollution from off-road diesel and natural gas engines recently took effect nationwide.

"One positive thing that might come out of this is that it would require more gathering of scientific data to determine if additional regulation is needed," Sgamma said of an EPA review. "We always support more data."